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# THE BIG THAW

BY SHIFRA PAININ ABRAMSON  
GOOD FORTUNE Israel Bureau



## Siberia's Jews Four Years After Communism's Meltdown



**M**y grammar school years were marked by periodic bomb drills — rehearsals for an event we hoped would never take place — in which the entire student body was marched down to the basement, where we stood lined up against the wall until the all-clear signal sounded. While these occasional excursions were no doubt more memorable for relieving the tedium of the classroom than for instilling a fear of nuclear attack, my father's regular fulminations against the Communists, who had taken over his native Russia and wiped out every vestige of Judaism, most definitely imbued me with an abhorrence for the Soviet

Union.

And although his confident predictions of the demise of the Soviet Empire sounded fanciful at the time, he has, in this as in so many other areas, indeed been proved correct. For today, after more than seventy years of extraordinary efforts to extricate Judaism, religious institutions have begun to sprout like grass after rain in the republics of the former Soviet Union. And now, even in remote Siberia, the frigid region that has perhaps come more than anything else to symbolize the cruelty and the repression of the Soviet regime, Jewish communal life has begun to emerge, phoenix-like, from the ashes of destruction.

The revitalization of Judaism in Siberia is in no small measure due to the efforts of the Jerusalem-based Shvut Ami Center for Russian Jews — which trains native Russian-speakers for outreach work among their compatriots. When the Center's shaliach, 28-year-old Rabbi Yehuda Weissler, arrived in Novosibirsk, Siberia's capital, in December 1993, he was not prepared for what awaited him. For although he had just come from Kiev, where he was running the yeshiva, the contrast between the two places was startling: Arriving in Siberia from the Ukraine brought almost the same culture shock as arriving in the Ukraine from the West.

(The farther that Jews were from the West the more disconnected they were from their past and their heritage.) Many of the 15,000 Jews in Novosibirsk (which has an intermarriage rate of over 90 percent) thought that Judaism didn't exist any more.

Nevertheless, Rabbi Weissler found the remnants of what had once been a Jewish community. An elderly Jew he met, Reb Mendel, who had been drafted into the Red army at age 20 and sent to Siberia, begged him to try to rebuild a proper Jewish community. "After over 50 years of being forced to live like a *goy*, the Jewish spark inside him still glows," Rabbi Weissler wrote

back to Jerusalem.

Rabbi Weissler started holding lectures on basic Judaism. He established a *shul*, with a regular Shabbos *minyan* followed by dinner. For the elderly participants, the weekly get-together brought back memories. "It is amazing," the rabbi noted, "to see how Jews who have been married to non-Jews all their lives are moved to tears on remembering a Shabbos at home, whether in Minsk, Berditchev, or Novhardok."

Heartwarming stories of Jewish resilience abound in Siberia. An 80-year-old woman in Novosibirsk, Basya Kutzinov, never married because she could not be certain of the Jewishness of prospective husbands. Now

she lived alone, with her 20 cats for company. As a young girl, Basya saw her father, the rabbi of Vladivostok, murdered before her eyes for refusing to work on Shabbos. Due to the absence of a local *shochet*, she has not tasted meat for over 50 years. She has only one tooth left in her mouth; as her other teeth rotted and crumbled, Basya refused to have them treated because in the Siberian capital, dentists work only on Saturday.

And the there's Reb Yeshaya, who was sent from the Ukraine to work in Siberia at age 15. Upon entering the *shul*, he recited aloud *Hamalach Hagoel*. When asked why, he explained that before he left

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Thanks to his position, Rabbi Weissler was permitted to visit the Siberian Gulag, normally off limits to foreigners. About ten percent of the 700 prisoners, who are

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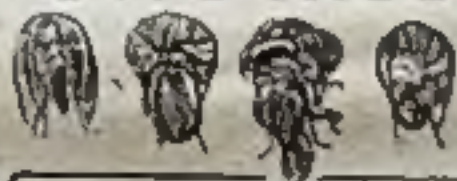
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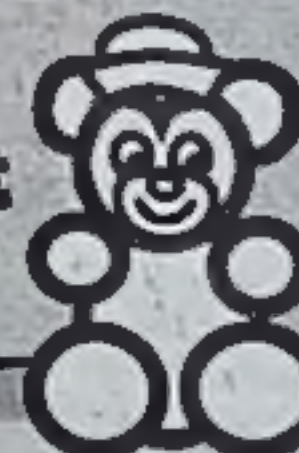
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in for criminal activity according to the supervisor, are Jewish.

"The colony covers an area of over two kilometers and is completely surrounded by a fifteen-foot high concrete wall with armed guards in watchtowers every couple of hundred meters. Although I was apprehensive, I was not prepared for the sight which met my eyes. A couple of hundred skeletal beings, mostly with shaved heads, dressed in filthy ragged uniforms, many with open sores on their faces, watched me through large, staring eyes.

"Their bed was a rag on the concrete floor. Sanitation consisted of a hole in the ground outside. The dirt and the stench was indescribable. There is no heating — even in winter when the temperature reaches minus 35 degrees. This scene, so comparable to the sights of the concentration camps, will be printed in my mind forever.

"I was then taken to the prison 'club room' (a hall with 300 seats), where I spoke to the Jewish prisoners for almost an hour. I told them about the Asseres Hadibros and that however low a Jew falls, he will always remain a Jew, and Hashem will always love him. I explained to them... that if one believes in G-d, one gains strength and can withstand all tests. It is never too late to repent for one's sins. The gated of teshuvah never close.

"The impact I had on them was clearly visible. About 15 of them came to speak to me. Every one of them told me that it is the first time since their imprisonment that they felt that someone cared for them and they had been spoken to warmly and in a civilized manner. Most of them told me that when they are free they will want to find out more about their religion and their origins. My visit to give chizuk to these pitiful beings with Yiddisheh neshomos was such a humbling experience. I shall never forget it."

Rabbi Weissler's words have brought more than a few tears to those of us in Israel who regularly read his reports. Confronted with such stories, one can only marvel at the stubborn tenacity and indomitable spirit that kept alive a faint Jewish spark to light the darkness of the Communist regime — and which is now being fanned into a softly-glowing flame. □